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Editorial: Trafficking (in) Representations: Understanding the recurring appeal of victimhood and slavery in neoliberal times

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Representations of trafficking and forced labour are pervasive within media, policymaking, and humanitarian debates, discourses and interventions. The terms exploitation and trafficking are increasingly used to characterise the work that migrants do in the sex industry and other irregular employment sectors. Of late, the notion of 'modern slavery' is on show in campaigns aiming to raise awareness about trafficking and funds for anti-trafficking initiatives among corporations and local enterprises as well as the general public. Celebrity interventions, militant documentaries, artistic works and fiction films have all become powerful vectors of the global distribution of the trafficking and 'modern slavery' rhetoric. These offer simplistic solutions to complex issues without challenging the structural and causal factors of inequality. Through fictional and narrow representations of ideal victims they tend to entrench racialised narratives and conflate all sex work with trafficking, which legitimates criminalising policies and interventions exacerbating the social vulnerability of sex workers. It is because of the under-researched role of representation in the development of anti-trafficking policies and initiatives that the *Anti-Trafficking Review* decided to devote a thematic issue on trafficking representations.

As humanitarian scripts and images saturate the representation of contemporary societies, the complex social and economic trajectories of migrants working in low-wage sectors, such as agriculture, domestic work and the sex industry, tend to be framed according to specific narratives of suffering and abuse. In the process, the diversity of people's migration and work experiences is simplified and reduced to a scenario of endemic trafficking and exploitation. This process of reduction and simplification of migrant lives and labouring subjectivities in public debates and media representations should be seen as part and parcel of the deep social transformations brought about by the globalisation of neoliberal ideologies and policies from the global North.

Our times are characterised by the reframing of social life according to the logic of profit, the contraction of collective forms of solidarity, the withdrawal of the state and, particularly in the global North, the dismantling of the welfare state. They are also characterised by a humanitarian representation of the growing inequality within and among societies in terms of the opposition between a supposedly unified 'humanity' and individual victims to be cared for.¹ In contemporary and highly mediated times the visual representation of social phenomena in fictional films, humanitarian campaigns and documentaries plays an increasingly crucial role in setting the 'primary definitions' according to which these are subsequently understood and addressed.² Humanitarian representations tend to frame victims as 'exceptions' rather than 'products' of the globalisation of neoliberal politics and to locate these victims outside of a supposedly shared humanity that actually expresses the privileges and moralities of the global North. In doing so, humanitarian representations legitimise and produce interventions 'containing' poor countries and the migration of their underprivileged and 'undesirable' citizens.³

The deepening of inequality, proliferation of conflicts and trends towards individualised and consumerist lifestyles under neoliberalism produce new experiences of exploitation and agency in relation to migrant work, especially in the sex industry. By migrating and working in the global sex industry, people try to cope with the increased precariousness and exploitability they encounter at home. Young adults also negotiate their aspiration to individualised, consumerist and hedonistic late modern lifestyles against the prevalence

¹ J Rancière, 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103, no. 2/3, 2004, pp. 297—310.

² S Hall, C Critcher, T Jefferson, J Clarke and B Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*, Macmillan Press, London, 2008, p. 59.

³ M Agier, *Managing the Undesirables*, Polity Press, Oxford, 2011.

of conservative gender values and sexual mores at home.⁴ Having access to a different material world by migrating and selling sex allows them to be the kind of woman or man they want to be, and this is a priority that shapes their understandings of agency and exploitation.

Simplistic trafficking and slavery representations portraying all migrant sex workers as powerless victims are problematic because they conceal the agency of the migrants working in the sex industry. This hides the actuality of migratory projects and the fact that sex work is, for most migrant women, men and transgender people, an income generating activity and an opportunity to achieve social mobility.⁵ Moral panics about 'sex slaves' also hide the reality that only a minority of migrants working in the sex industry is actually trafficked or forced.⁶ Tougher actions to combat trafficking, developed on the wave of a public outcry against sexual slavery, result in more stringent anti-immigration measures and shift migration towards irregular channels managed by third parties and agencies. This makes migrants dependent on third parties' organising of cross-border travel, gives third parties greater control over the costs, terms and routes of travel, and leaves ample space for abuse and profiteering from low wage and irregular work.⁷

By criminalising low wage and irregular work as individual and spectacular cases of trafficking, simplistic trafficking representations play a key role in legitimising rescue operations involving criminalisation, detention and arrest of both non-trafficked and trafficked persons.⁸ The process through which groups of migrants are represented as vulnerable to trafficking in relation to their involvement in sex work and intervened upon by local, national and international institutions and NGOs is best understood in terms of 'sexual humanitarianism'.⁹ As a result of this process and in order to have their rights recognised, as well as avoid incarceration and deportation, migrants, especially those selling sex, need to (re)present their biographies and experiences according to humanitarian definitions of exploitation, stereotypical notions of victimhood and normative sex-gender categorisations.

What we are seeing therefore is a persistence of the figure of the trafficking victim. Despite decades of research and activism that put forward a convincing critique of the passive and enslaved trafficking victim and replaced her with the figures of the active migrant, worker and political protagonist,¹⁰ the trafficking victim continues to dominate public and policy debates. The stereotypical image of the victim is of a young, innocent, foreign woman tricked into prostitution abroad. She is battered and kept under continuous surveillance so that her only hope is police rescue. Articles featured in this volume explore the cultural codes upon which the narratives of trafficking, slavery and victimhood rest and the reasons why they continue to retain their discursive power. They do so by addressing stereotypical trafficking representations in terms of 'sexual stories', as cultural scripts that are taken as signs of truth and presented to us as facts at specific historical junctures.¹¹ Stereotypes need to be understood as a form of powerful aesthetic and social constructs that condense complex connotations into fixed images and recurring narratives.¹²

Due to their fixity and recurrence, stereotypes also operate as myths, namely as narratives that provide communities with a collective identity. Such collective identities are consolidated through rituals, liturgies

⁴ D Brennan, *What's Love Got to Do with It? Transnational desires and sex tourism in the Dominican Republic*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004; S Cheng, *On the Move for Love. Migrant entertainers and the U.S. military in South Korea*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2010.

⁵ N Mai, 'Embodied Cosmopolitanisms: The subjective mobility of migrants working in the global sex industry', *Gender, Place and Culture*, vol. 20, issue 1, 2013, pp. 107—124.

⁶ N Mai, *Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry—Final policy-relevant report*, ISET (Institute for the Study of European Transformations), London Metropolitan University, 2009, retrieved 26 August 2016, <http://www.researchcatalogue.esrc.ac.uk/grants/RES-062-23-0137/read>

⁷ R Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2010; M Ribeiro and O Sacramento, 'Violence against Prostitutes: Findings of research in the Spanish-Portuguese frontier region', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2005, pp. 61—81; J Salt, 'Trafficking and Human Smuggling: A European perspective', *International Migration*, vol. 38, issue 3, 2000, pp. 31—56.

⁸ B Anderson and J O'Connell Davidson, *Is Trafficking in Human Beings Demand Driven? A multi-country pilot study*, International Organization for Migration, Geneva, 2003.

⁹ N Mai, 'Assembling Samira: Understanding sexual humanitarianism through experimental filmmaking,' *antiAtlas Journal*, vol. 1, 2016, retrieved 21 August 2016, <http://www.antiatlas-journal.net/01-assembling-samira-understanding-sexual-humanitarianism-through-experimental-filmmaking>

¹⁰ R Andrijasevic, C Aradau, J Huysmans, et al., 'European Citizenship Unbound: Sex work, mobility, mobilisation', *Environment and Planning D: Society and space*, vol. 30, issue 3, 2012, pp. 497—514; S Shah, *Street Corner Secrets*, Duke University Press, Raleigh, 2014.

¹¹ K Plummer, 'Telling Sexual Stories in a Late Modern World', *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 18, 2005, pp. 101—120.

¹² R Dyer, *The Matter of Images. Essays on Representation*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.

and symbols that are constantly reproduced through their repetition.¹³ The mythological function of the trafficking narrative and the victim figure are most visible in the fact that the trafficking plot never varies: it starts with deception, which is followed by coercion into prostitution, moves on to the tragedy of (sexual) slavery and finally finds resolution through the rescue of the victim by the police or an NGO.¹⁴ Representations that depict women as kidnapped from their homes, coerced into migration and then imprisoned in brothels create a false dichotomy between ‘ideal’ and real victims,¹⁵ exclude those women who do not fit the narrow definition of the ideal victim¹⁶ and mark the boundary between citizens and non-citizens.¹⁷ Studies of media coverage, for example in Norway, have pointed to the objectification and sexualisation of Nigerian women working in the sex sector¹⁸ and those of the stripping industry in the USA have exposed the hypersexualisation of the Black and Latina women and the racialised dimension of the discursive construction of sex work.¹⁹ Representation is therefore key to understanding the historical, cultural and political specificity of the figure of the victim. Given the global resonance of trafficking sexual stories and of the embedded figure of the victim in humanitarian representations, it is of utmost importance to investigate the significance of their recurrence in different and specific geographical and historical settings. In this respect trafficking representations should not be seen as ‘free-floating’ but rather as embedded within narrative tropes and discursive constructions about gender, sexuality, race and class that are culturally, geopolitically and historically specific.²⁰

The Special Issue

Contributions in this issue of the *Anti-Trafficking Review* explore the specific visual material and narratives, both past and present, through which representations of trafficking and slavery are constructed and reproduced in film, TV, newspapers and public discourse. The articles examine such images and narratives in Australia, Cambodia, Nigeria, Serbia, Denmark, the UK, and the USA and discuss the appeal held by popular representations of trafficking and the victim of trafficking. Contributors investigate how trafficking representations operate in different historical, geopolitical and social contexts.

Claudia Cojocaru, Annie Hill and Heidi Hoefinger examine and challenge the construction of the victimhood narrative in the USA, the UK, and Cambodia respectively. In her contribution, Claudia Cojocaru adopts an analytical auto-ethnographic approach to discuss an art exhibit on trafficking into the sex industry in New York City in 2015. Drawing on her personal experiences as a formerly trafficked individual, as well as those of the women she worked with, Cojocaru challenges the abolitionist movement’s framing both of women trafficked in the sex industry and of voluntary sex workers. She also argues that the ‘secondary exploitation’ of representations of trafficked people by opportunistic actors further endangers women who are already stigmatised and marginalised. Annie Hill analyses the news representation of a UK police raid on a massage parlour called Cuddles in 2005 and argues that the police and the media participated in discriminatory practices by circulating a master narrative of trafficking and generating publicity that harmed the women who were supposed to need rescuing. Hill examines details of the raid and its aftermath that were obscured by the official account. By analysing data on migrant women and sex workers’ experiences of raids and offering an alternative reading of the circulated raid photographs, she argues that the rights of women targeted in raids were disregarded and the harms they experienced dismissed in order to amplify the state’s anti-trafficking agenda. Heidi Hoefinger also explores the issue of trafficking representations as potentially exploitative of trafficked people’s experiences by

¹³ G Shöpfli, ‘The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myth’, in G Hosking and G Shöpfli (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood*, Hurst, London, 1997, pp. 19–35.

¹⁴ J Doezeema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters: The construction of trafficking*, Zed Books, London, 2010.

¹⁵ C Hoyle, M Bosworth and M Dempsey, ‘Labelling the Victims of Sex Trafficking: Exploring the borderland between rhetoric and reality’, *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2011, pp. 313–329.

¹⁶ E O’Brien, ‘Ideal Victims in Trafficking Awareness Campaigns’, in K Carrington, M Ball, E O’Brien and J Tauri (eds.), *Crime, Justice and Social Democracy: International perspectives*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013, pp. 315–325.

¹⁷ R Andrijašević, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, 2007, vol. 86, pp. 24–44.

¹⁸ S Jahnson, *Women who Cross Borders—Black magic? A critical discourse analysis of the Norwegian newspaper coverage*, Masters thesis, Department of Sociology, The University of Bergen, Bergen, 2007.

¹⁹ S Brooks, ‘Hypersexualization and the Dark Body: Race and inequality among Black and Latina women in the exotic dance industry’, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2010, pp. 70–80.

²⁰ R Andrijašević, ‘The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation’, in M Evans et al (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Sage, London, 2014, pp. 359–373; Grupo Davida, ‘Trafficking as a Floating Signifier: The view from Brazil’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 4, 2015, pp. 161–166.

referring to the controversial case of Somaly Mam—the self-declared ‘sex slave’ turned ‘modern-day hero’. Hoefinger’s contribution analyses Mam’s prolific trajectory of self-representation along tropes of sexual humanitarianism and argues that these narratives helped to set in motion one of the most lucrative and, in many ways, most exploitative and problematic anti-trafficking endeavours in Cambodia to date.

The ways in which the victim of trafficking stereotype operates so as to separate social groups and populations both within as well as between nations is a recurring topic in this volume. Contributions by Anna Szörényi and Gabriella Sanchez show how notions of trafficking, victimhood, and slavery are deployed in order to establish borders of belonging and citizenship. Anna Szörényi discusses an Australian TV programme titled ‘Slaying Away’ that revealed the ongoing labour exploitation in the food industry of migrant workers on working holiday visas. This situation, first referred to as an instance of worker exploitation, soon became a matter of visa violations and hence arrest of ‘illegal workers’. Szörényi argues that this representational shift is enabled by cultural amnesia over Australia’s history of exploitation of racialised and migrant labourers, which she sees as allowing ‘slavery’ to be represented as a ‘foreign’ problem that can be expelled from the body of the nation in defence of the purity of the national domestic space. In a similar way Gabriella Sanchez’s contribution shows that the representation of human trafficking at the US-Mexico border not only confirms ethnic stereotypes of Mexican women as foreign and underdeveloped, but also reproduces long-standing identity and geopolitical tensions in a border community with a history of segregation, poverty and inequality. Drawing from observations of human trafficking awareness trainings and from interviews and interactions with human trafficking victim advocates, Sanchez analyses how references to victims’ Mexican origin reinforce social and ethnic difference despite the continuities connecting communities on both sides of the US-Mexico divide.

At the same time, this special issue examines the ways in which mainstream trafficking and ‘modern slavery’ representations hinder a better understanding of how the socio-economic and political inequalities framing labour exploitation are produced and maintained in various locations and at different historical settings. Articles by Rachael Attwood and Elena Krsmanovic address these topics in relation to England at the turn of the 20th century and contemporary Serbia, respectively. Attwood’s contribution seeks to revise Jo Doezeema’s suggestion that ‘the white slave’ was the only dominant representation of ‘the trafficked woman’ used by early anti-trafficking advocates in Europe and the United States. She explores the way in which the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women (JAPGW), one of the pillars of England’s early anti-trafficking movement, represented the female Jewish migrants it deemed at risk of being trafficked into sex work between 1890 and 1910. Attwood argues that the JAPGW stigmatised these women by placing, in a paradoxically anti-Semitic way, most of the blame for trafficking upon them and by positioning them to a greater or a lesser extent as ‘undesirable and undeserving working-class foreigners’ who could never become respectable English women. Krsmanovic’s contribution analyses representations of people trafficked into the sex industry in photographs accompanying articles published in Serbian online media from 2011 to 2014. Her analysis shows that portrayals of trafficked persons fit into two dominant frames: powerless victim or unworthy prostitute. Her article suggests that these images tell us more about societal fear of insecurity, ideas about gender, erotic obsessions and morality than about the phenomenon of human trafficking itself. It also argues that the meaning of trafficking is shaped by the deeply embedded codes of patriarchy and misogyny and the racialised hierarchies present in Serbian society.

As the contributions to this issue show, current sexual humanitarian times are characterised by the emergence of a representation regime and filmmaking genres that are deeply implicated in the global circulation and validation of trafficking stereotypes and myths by conflating fictional accounts with deliberately misconstrued evidence. This dynamic results in a new genre, that of ‘melomentary’, which frames empirical evidence on ‘sex trafficking’ according to a strategically predetermined plot line and to subject positions that reify women as innocent victims and men as evil villains.²¹ The rise of this genre urged critical filmmaking responses so as to challenge the voyeurism, ethics and the criteria of authenticity characterising sexual humanitarian melomentaries.²²

²¹ C S Vance, ‘Innocence and Experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences for law and policy’, *History of the Present*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2012, pp. 200–218.

²² See films by Nicola Mai *Normal* (2012), *Samira* (2013) and *Travel* (2016). In his films Nick Mai used actors and naturalistic aesthetics to represent real interview transcripts and ethnographic situations emerging from original research on migrant sex workers. By both creating and interrupting a suspension of disbelief through the adoption of a hybrid fiction/documentary method Mai’s films aim to both reproduce and challenge the affective appeal and performative dimensions characterising sexual humanitarian melomentaries. The trailers of Nick Mai’s films are available online here: <https://vimeo.com/user3467382>

In this volume two contributors address the issue of how to represent trafficking differently from existing tropes, stereotypes and genres in different but interlinked respects. Nicholas de Villiers deploys feminist psychoanalytic film theory and theories of affect to make sense of the appeal of sensational exposés like Lifetime Television's *Human Trafficking* (2005). De Villiers also refers to film theory about the 'rebooting' of film franchises to explain the preponderance of similar programming, such as *Sex Slaves* (2005), *Selling the Girl Next Door* (2011) and *Trafficked* (2016), and the way contemporary discourses of human trafficking have effectively rebranded the myth of 'white slavery'. Finally, Sine Plambech discusses the ethical and aesthetic predicaments posed to attempts to produce non-simplistic and alternative representations of trafficking and sex work migration by the genre and production necessities of documentary filmmaking. Her article draws on two films about women migrant sex workers she produced as an anthropologist and filmmaker—*Trafficking* (2010) and *Becky's Journey* (2014)—and reviews mainstream anti-trafficking documentaries. Plambech argues that a one-dimensional perspective on sex work and trafficking is just one of the factors influencing the filmmaking process. She emphasises that the theoretical and practical reasons behind production decisions mean that films are often the result of compromises with what is possible in documentary filmmaking.²³

Overall the articles in this issue show that trafficking representations deserve critical attention because they make the expanding complexity of social life intelligible according to the profit-accumulation mantra of neoliberalism in different and interlinked ways. They mobilise stereotypical narratives and visual constructions about sexuality, gender, class and race that end up by demarcating people's entitlement to social mobility and citizenship in increasingly unequal times. By focusing on the spectacular and criminal exploitation of a minority of victims, they legitimise restrictive migration policies and anti-trafficking interventions containing racially and socially 'undesirable' groups and exacerbating migrant workers' exposure to trafficking. Most importantly stereotypical trafficking representations conveniently distract the global public from their increasing and shared day-to-day exploitability as workers because of the systematic erosion of labour rights globally. In doing so, they become complicit in the perpetuation of the very social inequalities, hierarchies and conflicts that allow exploitation and trafficking to occur.

Rutvica Andrijasevic is an activist scholar with research interests in the areas of migrant labour, gender, national state power, and global firms. Rutvica's research on trafficking and her book *'Agency, Migration and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking'* (2010) address the link between migration, gendered subjectivity and changes in citizenship in Europe. Rutvica's current project focuses on global firms and the rise of China, and investigates the ways in which 'Chinese' modes of production and management are impacting labour relations in Europe. She works as an Associate Professor of Management at the School of Economics, Finance and Management at the University of Bristol and is a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Review*. Email: ra14611@bristol.ac.uk

Nicola Mai is a sociologist, an ethnographer and a filmmaker working as Professor of Sociology and Migration Studies at the University of Kingston, London. His academic writing and films focus on the experiences and representations of migrants working in the global sex industry. Through experimental ethnographic films and original research findings he challenges the currently prevailing representation of the relationship between migration and sex work in terms of trafficking, while focusing on the dynamics of exploitation and agency that are implicated. Nick was recently awarded a four-year European Research Council (ERC) grant—SEXHUM—looking at the impact of anti-trafficking policies and interventions on the lives of migrant sex workers in Australia, France, New Zealand and the US. Email: n.mai@kingston.ac.uk

²³ Plambech's article was presented at the Representing Sexual Humanitarianism workshop organised by C Giametta and N Mai on 23 and 24 September 2015 at the MuCEM (Marseille). The workshop emerged from the research project *Embodied Borders (EMBORDERS)* directed by N Mai and funded by the A*MIDEX Foundation of Aix-Marseille Université (2014-15). For more information on the workshop and the Emborders project see: <https://sexualhumanitarianism.wordpress.com>